











## **KING LEAR'S WIFE**





# KING LEAR'S WIFE

*Play in One Act*

BY

GORDON BOTTOMLEY

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## **KING LEAR'S WIFE**

een Hygd  
ing Sean  
naryn  
Jornflaith  
Jornind  
Cordind  
Regan

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

*The scene is a bedchamber in a one-storied house. The walls consist of a few courses of huge irregular boulders roughly squared and fitted together; a thatched roof rises steeply from the back wall. In the centre of the back wall is a doorway opening on a garden and covered by two leather curtains; the chamber is partially hung with similar hangings stitched with bright wools. There is a small window on each side of this door.*

*Toward the front a bed stands with its head against the right wall; it has thin leather curtains hung by thongs and drawn back. Farther forward a rich robe and a crown hang on a peg in the same wall. There is a second door beyond the bed, and between this and the bed's head stands a small table with a bronze lamp and a bronze cup on it. Queen HYGD, an emaciated woman, is asleep in the bed; her plenteous black hair, veined with silver,*

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

*spreads over the pillow. Her waiting woman MERRYNN, middle-aged and hard-featured, sits watching her in a chair on the farther side of the bed. The light of early morning fills the room.*

### MERRYNN

Many, many must die who long to live,  
Yet this one cannot die who longs to die:  
Even her sleep, come now at last, thwarts  
death,

Although sleep lures us all half way to  
death. . . .

I could not sit beside her every night  
If I believed that I might suffer so:  
I am sure I am not made to be diseased,  
I feel there is no malady can touch me—  
Save the red cancer, growing where it will.

*[Taking her beads from her girdle,  
she kneels at the foot of the bed.]*

O sweet Saint Cleer, and sweet Saint Elid,  
too,

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

Shield me from rooting cancers and from  
madness :

Shield me from sudden death, worse than  
two death-beds ;

Let me not lie like this unwanted queen,  
Yet let my time come not ere I am ready—  
Grant space enow to relish the watcher's  
tears

And give my clothes away and calm my  
features

And streek my limbs according to my will,  
Not the hard will of fumbling corpse-  
washers.

*[She prays silently.]*

*[KING LEAR, a great, golden-bearded  
man in the full maturity of life, en-  
ters abruptly by the door beyond  
the bed, followed by the PHYSI-  
CIAN.]*

LEAR

Why are you here? Are you here for ever?

•

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Where is the young Scotswoman? Where  
is she?

MERRYN

O sire, move softly; the queen sleeps at  
last.

LEAR

*[Continuing in an undertone.]*

Where is the young Scotswoman? Where  
is Gormflaith?

It is her watch. . . . I know; I have marked  
your hours.

Did the queen send her away? Did the  
queen

Bid you stay near her in her hate of Gorm-  
flaith?

You work upon her yeasting brain to  
think

That she 's not safe except when you  
crouch near her



## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

To spy with your dropt eyes and soundless  
presence.

### MERRYIN

Sire, midnight should have ended Gorm-  
flaith's watch,  
But Gormflaith had another kind of will  
And ended at a godlier hour by slumber,  
A letter in her hand, the night-lamp out.  
She loitered in the hall when she should  
sleep.  
My duty has two hours ere she returns.

### LEAR

The queen should have young women about  
her bed,  
Fresh cool-breathed women to lie down at  
her side  
And plenish her with vigour; for sick or  
wasted women

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Can draw a virtue from such abounding  
    presence,  
When night makes life unwary and looses  
    the strings of being,  
Even by the breath, and most of all by  
    sleep.  
Her slumber was then no fault: go you and  
    find her.

## PHYSICIAN

It is not strange that a bought watcher  
    drownses;  
What is most strange is that the queen  
    sleeps  
Who would not sleep for all my draughts of  
    sleep  
In the last days. When did this change  
    appear?

## MERRY

We shall not know—it came while  
    Gormflaith nodded.

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

When I awoke her and she saw the queen,  
She could not speak for fear :  
When the rekindling lamp showed  
    certainly  
The bed-clothes stirring about our lady's  
    neck,  
She knew there was no death, she breathed,  
    she said  
She had not slept until her mistress slept  
And lulled her ; but I asked her how her  
    mistress  
Slept, and her utterance faded.  
She should be blamed with rods, as I was  
    blamed  
For slumber, after a day and a night of  
    watching,  
By the queen's child-bed, twenty years ago.

LEAR

She does what she must do : let her alone.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

I know her watch is now : get gone and  
send her.

[MERRYNN *goes out by the door beyond the bed.*]

Is it a portent now to sleep at night?  
What change is here? What see you in the  
queen?  
Can you discern how this disease will end?

## PHYSICIAN

Surmise might spring and healing follow  
yet,  
If I could find a trouble that could heal;  
But these strong inward pains that keep  
her ebbing  
Have not their source in perishing flesh.  
I have seen women creep into their beds  
And sink with that blind pain because they  
nursed  
Some bitterness or burden in the mind

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

That drew the life, sucklings too long at  
breast.

Do you know such a cause in this poor  
lady?

LEAR

There is no cause. How should there be a  
cause?

PHYSICIAN

We cannot die wholly against our wills;  
And in the texture of women I have found  
Harder determination than in men:  
The body grows impatient of enduring,  
The harried mind is from the body  
estranged,  
And we consent to go: by the queen's  
touch,  
The way she moves—or does not move—in  
bed,

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

The eyes so cold and keen in her white  
mask,

I know she has consented.

The snarling look of a mute wounded hawk,  
That would be let alone, is always hers—

Yet she was sorely tender: it may be  
Some wound in her affection will not heal.  
We should be careful—the mind can so be  
hurt

That nought can make it be unhurt again.

Where, then, did her affection most  
persist?

## LEAR

Old bone-patcher, old digger in men's flesh,  
Doctors are ever itching to be priests,  
Meddling in conduct, natures, life's  
privacies.

We have been coupled now for twenty  
years,

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And she has never turned from me an  
hour—

She knows a woman's duty and a queen's:  
Whose, then, can her affection be but mine?  
How can I hurt her—she is still my queen?  
If her strong inward pain is a real pain  
Find me some certain drug to medicine it:  
When common beings have decayed past  
help,

There must be still some drug for a king to  
use;

For nothing ought to be denied to kings.

## PHYSICIAN

For the mere anguish there is such a  
potion.

The gum of warpy juniper shoots is  
seethed

With the torn marrow of an adder's spine;  
An unflawed emerald is pushed to dust

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And mingled there; that broth must cool in  
moonlight.

I have indeed attempted this already,  
But the poor emeralds I could extort  
From wry-mouthed earls' women had no  
force.

In two more dawns it will be late for  
potions . . .

There are not many emeralds in Britain,  
And there is none for vividness and  
strength

Like the great stone that hangs upon your  
breast:

If you will waste it for her she shall be  
holpen.

LEAR

*[With rising voice.]*

Shatter my emerald? My emerald? My  
emerald?

A high king of Eire gave it to his daughter



*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Who mothered generations of us, the kings  
of Britain;

It has a spiritual influence; its heart  
Burns when it sees the sun. . . . Shatter  
my emerald!

Only the fungused brain and carious mouth  
Of senile things could shape such thought.

. . . My emerald!

[HYGD *stirs uneasily in her sleep.*]

PHYSICIAN

Speak lower, low; for your good fame,  
speak low—

If she should waken thus . . .

LEAR

There is no wise man  
Believes that medicine is in a jewel.  
It is enough that you have failed with one.  
Seek you a common stone. I 'll not do it.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Let her eat heartily: she is spent with  
fasting.

Let her stand up and walk: she is so still  
Her blood can never nourish her. Come  
away.

PHYSICIAN

I must not leave her ere the woman  
comes—  
Or will some other woman . . .

LEAR

No, no, no, no;  
The queen is not herself; she speaks  
without sense;  
Only Merryn and Gormflaith understand.  
She is better quiet. Come. . . .

*[He urges the PHYSICIAN roughly  
away by the shoulder.]*

My emerald! . . .

KING LEAR'S WIFE

[*He follows the PHYSICIAN out by the door at the back.*]

[*QUEEN HYGD awakes at his last noisy words as he disappears.*]

HYGD

I have not slept; I did but close mine eyes  
A little while—a little while forgetting. . . .  
Where are you, Merryn? . . . Ah, it is not  
Merryn. . . .

Bring me the cup of whey, woman; I  
thirst. . . .

Will you speak to me if I say your name?  
Will you not listen, Gormflaith? . . . Can  
you hear?

I am very thirsty—let me drink. . . .

Ah, wicked woman, why did I speak to  
you:

I will not be your suppliant again. . . .

Where are you? O, where are you? . . .

Where are you?

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

*[She tries to raise herself to look about the room, but sinks back helplessly.]*

*[The curtains of the door at the back are parted, and GONERIL appears in hunting dress—her kirtle caught up in her girdle, a light spear over her shoulder—standing there a moment, then entering noiselessly and approaching the bed. She is a girl just turning to womanhood, proud in her poise, swift and cold, an almost gleaming presence, a virgin huntress.]*

### GONERIL

Mother, were you calling?

Have I awakened you?

They said that you were sleeping.

Why are you left alone, mother, my dear  
one?

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

HYGD

Who are you? No, no, no! Stand farther  
off!

You pulse and glow; you are too vital;  
your presence hurts. . . .

Freshness of hill-swards, wind and  
trodden ling,

I should have known that Goneril stands  
here.

It is yet dawn, but you have been afoot  
Afar and long: where could you climb so  
soon?

GONERIL

Dearest, I am an evil daughter to you:  
I never thought of you—O, never once—  
Until I heard a moor-bird cry like you.  
I am wicked, rapt in joys of breath and life,  
And I must force myself to think of you.  
I leave you to caretakers' cold gentleness;

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

But O, I did not think that they dare leave  
you.

What woman should be here?

HYGD

I have forgot. . . .

I know not. . . . She will be about some  
duty.

I do not matter : my time is done . . . nigh  
done. . . .

Bought hands can well prepare me for a  
grave,

And all the generations must serve youth.

My girls shall live untroubled while they  
may,

And learn happiness once while yet blind  
men

Have injured not their freedom ;

For women are not meant for happiness.

Where have you been, my falcon?

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

GONERIL

I dreamt that I was swimming, shoulder  
up,  
And drave the bed-clothes spreading to the  
floor:  
Coldness awoke me; through the waning  
darkness  
I heard far hounds give shivering aëry  
tongue,  
Remote, withdrawing, suddenly faint and  
near;  
I leapt and saw a pack of stretching  
weasels  
Hunt a pale coney in a soundless rush,  
Their elfin and thin yelping pierced my  
heart  
As with an unseen beauty long awaited;  
Wolf-skin and cloak I buckled over this  
night-gear,  
And took my honoured spear from my  
bed-side

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Where none but I may touch its purity,  
And sped as lightly down the dewy bank  
As any mothy owl that hunts quick mice.  
They went crying, crying, but I lost them  
Before I stept, with the first tips of light,  
On Raven Crag near by the Druid Stones;  
So I paused there and, stooping, pressed  
    my hand  
Against the stony bed of the clear stream;  
Then entered I the circle and raised up  
My shining hand in cold stern adoration  
Even as the first great gleam went up the  
    sky.

HYGD

Ay, you do well to worship on that height:  
Life is free to the quick up in the wind,  
And the wind bares you for a god's  
    descent—  
For wind is a spirit immediate and aged.



*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And you do well to worship harsh  
men-gods,  
God Wind and Those who built his Stones  
with him:

All gods are cruel, bitter, and to be bribed,  
But women-gods are mean and cunning as  
well.

That fierce old virgin, Cornish Merryn,  
prays

To a young woman, yes and even a virgin—  
The poorest kind of woman—and she says  
That is to be a Christian: avoid then  
Her worship most, for men hate such  
denials,

And any woman scorns her unwed  
daughter.

Where sped you from the height? Did  
Regan join you there?

GONERIL

Does Regan worship anywhere at dawn?

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

The sweaty, half clad cook-maids render  
lard

Out in the scullery, after pig-killing,  
And Regan sidles among their greasy  
skirts,

Smeary and hot as they, for craps to suck.  
I lost my thoughts before the giant  
Stones. . . .

And when anew the earth assembled round  
me

I swung out on the heath and woke a hare  
And speared it at a cast and shouldered it,  
Startled another drinking at a tarn  
And speared it ere it leapt; so steady and  
clear

Had the god in his fastness made my mind.  
Then, as I took those dead things in my  
hands,

I felt shame light my face from deep  
within,

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And loathing and contempt shake in my  
bowels,

That such unclean coarse blows from me  
had issued

To crush delicate things to bloody mash  
And blemish their fur when I would only  
kill.

My gladness left me; I careered no more  
Upon the morning; I went down from  
there

With empty hands:

But under the first trees and without  
thought

I stole on coneys at play and stooped at  
one;

I hunted it, I caught it up to me  
As I outsprang it, and with this thin knife  
Pierced it from eye to eye; and it was dead,  
Untorn, unsullied, and with flawless fur.  
Then my untroubled mind came back to me.

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

HYGD

Leap down the glades with a fawn's  
    ignorance;  
Live you your fill of a harsh purity;  
Be wild and calm and lonely while you may.  
These are your nature's joys, and it is  
    human  
Only to recognize our nature's joys  
When we are losing them for ever.

GONERIL

But why  
Do you say this to me with a sore heart?  
You are a queen, and speak from the top  
    of life,  
And when you choose to wish for others'  
    joys  
Those others must have woe.

HYGD

The hour comes for you to turn to a man

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And give yourself with the high heart of  
youth  
More lavishly than a queen gives anything.  
But when a woman gives herself  
She must give herself forever and have  
faith;  
For woman is a thing of a season of years,  
She is an early fruit that will not keep,  
She can be drained and as a husk survive  
To hope for reverence for what has been;  
While man renews himself into old age,  
And gives himself according to his need,  
And women more unborn than his next  
child  
May take him yet with youth  
And lose him with their potency.

GONERIL

But women need not wed these men.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

HYGD

We are good human currency, like gold,  
For men to pass among them when they  
choose.

*[A child's hands beat on the outside  
of the door beyond the bed.]*

CORDEIL'S VOICE

*[A child's voice outside.]*

Father . . . Father . . . Father. . . .

Are you here?

Merryn, ugly Merryn, let me in. . . .

I know my father is here. . . . I want him.

. . . Now. . . .

Mother, chide Merryn, she is old and  
slow. . . .

HYGD

*[Softly.]*

My little curse. Send her away—  
away. . . .

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KING LEAR'S WIFE

CORDEIL'S VOICE

Father . . . O father, father. . . . I want  
my father.

GONERIL

*[Opening the door a little way.]*

Hush; hush—you hurt your mother with  
your voice.

You cannot come in, Cordeil; you must go  
away:

Your father is not here. . . .

CORDEIL'S VOICE

He must be here:

He is not in his chamber or the hall,

He is not in the stable or with Gormflaith:

He promised I should ride with him at  
dawn

And sit before his saddle and hold his  
hawk,

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And ride with him and ride to the  
heron-marsh;  
He said that he would give me the first  
heron,  
And hang the longest feathers in my hair.

GONERIL

Then you must haste to find him;  
He may be riding now. . . .

CORDEIL'S VOICE

But Gerda said she saw him enter here.

GONERIL

Indeed, he is not here. . . .

CORDEIL'S VOICE

Let me look. . . .

GONERIL

You are too noisy. Must I make you go?



## KING LEAR'S WIFE

### CORDEIL'S VOICE

Mother, Goneril is unkind to me.

### HYGD

*[Raising herself in bed excitedly,  
and speaking so vehemently that  
her utterance strangles itself.]*

Go, go, thou evil child, thou ill-comer.

*[GONERIL, with a sudden strong  
movement, shuts the resisting  
door and holds it rigidly. The  
little hands beat on it madly for a  
moment, then the child's voice is  
heard in a retreating wail.]*

### GONERIL

Though she is wilful, obeying only the king,  
She is a very little child, mother,  
To be so bitterly thought of.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

HYGD

Because a woman gives herself for ever  
Cordeil the useless had to be conceived  
(Like an afterthought that deceives  
nobody)  
To keep her father from another woman.  
And I lie here.

GONERIL

[*After a silence.*]

Hard and unjust my father has been to me;  
Yet that has knitted up within my mind  
A love of coldness and a love of him  
Who makes me firm, wary, swift and  
secret,  
Until I feel if I become a mother  
I shall at need be cruel to my children,  
And ever cold, to string their natures  
harder  
And make them able to endure men's  
deeds;

KING LEAR'S WIFE

But now I wonder if injustice  
Keeps house with baseness, taught by  
    kinship—

I never thought a king could be untrue,  
I never thought my father was  
    unclean. . . .

O mother, mother, what is it? Is this  
    dying?

HYGD

I think I am only faint. . . .  
Give me the cup of whey. . . .

[GONERIL *takes the cup and, sup-  
    porting* HYGD, *lets her drink.*]

GONERIL

There is too little here. When was it  
    made?

HYGD

Yester-eve. . . . Yester-morn. . . .

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

GONERIL

Unhappy mother,  
You have no daughter to take thought for  
you—  
No servant's love to shame a daughter  
with,  
Though I am shamed—you must have other  
food,  
Straightway I bring you meat. . . .

HYGD

It is no use. . . .  
Plenish the cup for me. . . . Not now, not  
now,  
But in a while; for I am heavy now. . . .  
Old Wynoc's potions loiter in my veins,  
And tides of heaviness pour over me  
Each time I wake and think. I could sleep  
now.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

GONERIL

Then I shall lull you, as you once lulled me.

*[Seating herself on the bed, she sings.]*

The owlets in roof-holes  
Can sing for themselves;  
The smallest brown squirrel  
Both scampers and delves;  
But a baby does nothing—  
She never knows how—  
She must hark to her mother  
Who sings to her now.  
Sleep then, ladykin, peeping so;  
Hide your handies and ley lei lo.

*[She bends over HYGD and kisses her; they laugh softly together. LEAR parts the curtains of the door at the back, stands there a moment, then goes away noiselessly.]*

The lish baby otter  
Is sleeky and streaming

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

With catching bright fishes  
Ere babies learn dreaming;  
But no wet little otter  
Is ever so warm  
As the fleecy-wrapt baby  
'Twixt me and my arm.  
Sleep, big mousie. . . .

HYGD

*[Suddenly irritable.]*

Be quiet. . . . I cannot bear it.

*[She turns her head away from  
GONERIL and closes her eyes.]*

*[As GONERIL watches her in silence,  
GORMFLAITH enters by the door  
beyond the bed. She is young and  
tall and fresh-coloured; her red  
hair coils and crisps close to her  
little head, shewing its shape.  
Her movements are soft and un-  
hurried; her manner is quiet and  
ingratiating and a little too agree-  
able; she speaks a little too gen-  
tly.]*

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

GONERIL

*[Meeting her near the door and speaking in a low voice.]*

Why did you leave the queen? Where  
have you been?

Why have you so neglected this grave  
duty?

GORMFLAITH

This is the instant of my duty, princess:  
From midnight until now was Merryn's  
watch.

I thought to find her here: is she not here?

*[HYGD turns to look at the speakers;  
then, turning back, closes her eyes  
again and lies as if asleep.]*

GONERIL

I found the queen alone. I heard her cry  
your name.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

GORMFLAITH

Your anger is not too great, madam; I  
grieve  
That one so old as Merryn should act  
thus—  
So old and trusted and favoured and so  
callous.

GONERIL

The queen has had no food since yester-  
night.

GORMFLAITH

Madam, that is too monstrous to conceive:  
I will seek food. I will prepare it now.

GONERIL

Stay here: and know, if the queen is left  
again,  
You shall be beaten with two rods at once.



## KING LEAR'S WIFE

*[She picks up the cup and goes out by the door beyond the bed.]*

*[GORMFLAITH turns the chair a little away from the bed so that she can watch the far door, and, seating herself, draws a letter from her bosom.]*

GORMFLAITH

*[To herself, reading.]*

“Open your window when the moon is  
dead,

And I will come again.

The men say everywhere that you are  
faithless,

The women say your face is a false face  
And your eyes shifty eyes. Ah, but I love  
you, Gormflaith.

Do not forget your window-latch to-night,  
For when the moon is dead the house is  
still.”

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

[LEAR again parts the door-curtains at the back and, seeing GORMFLAITH, enters. At the first slight rustle of the curtains GORMFLAITH stealthily slips the letter back into her bosom before turning gradually, a finger to her lips, to see who approaches her.]

LEAR

[Leaning over the side of her chair.]

Lady, what do you read?

GORMFLAITH

I read a letter, sire.

LEAR

A letter—a letter—what read you in a letter?

GORMFLAITH

[Taking another letter from her gir-dle.]

KING LEAR'S WIFE

Your words to me—my lonely joy your  
words. . . .

“If you are steady and true as your  
gaze”—

LEAR

*[Tearing the letter from her, crum-  
pling it, and flinging it to the back  
of the room.]*

Pest!

You should not carry a king's letters about,  
Nor hoard a king's letters.

GORMFLAITH

No, sire.

LEAR

Must the king also stand in the presence  
now?

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

GORMFLAITH

[*Rising.*]

Pardon my troubled mind; you have taken  
my letter from me.

[*LEAR seats himself and takes GORM-  
FLAITH'S hand.*]

GORMFLAITH

Wait, wait,—I might be seen. The queen  
may waken yet.

[*Stepping lightly to the bed, she  
noiselessly slips the curtain on  
that side as far forward as it will  
come. Then she returns to LEAR,  
who draws her to him and seats  
her on his knee.*]

LEAR

You have been long in coming:  
Was Merryn long in finding you?

GORMFLAITH

[*Playing with LEAR'S emerald.*]

Did Merryn . . .

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

Has Merryn been . . . She loitered long  
before she came,  
For I was at the women's bathing-place ere  
dawn. . . .  
No jewel in all the land excites me and  
enthralls  
Like this strong source of light that lives  
upon your breast.

### LEAR

*[Taking the jewel-chain from his  
neck and slipping it over GORM-  
FLAITH's head while she still holds  
the emerald.]*

Wear it within your breast to fill the gentle  
place  
That cherished the poor letter lately torn  
from you.

### GORMFLAITH

Did Merryn at your bidding, then, forsake  
her queen?

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

[LEAR *nods.*]

You must not, ah, you must not do these  
masterful things,  
Even to grasp a precious meeting for us  
two;  
For the reproach and chiding are so hard  
to me,  
And even you can never fight the silent  
women  
In hidden league against me, all this house  
of women.  
Merryn has left her queen in unwatched  
loneliness,  
And yet your daughter Princess Goneril  
has said  
(With lips that scarce held back the spittle  
for my face)  
That if the queen is left again I shall be  
whipt.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

LEAR

Children speak of the punishments they  
know.

Her back is now not half so white as yours,  
And you shall write your will upon it yet.

GORMFLAITH

Ah, no, my king, my faithful. . . . Ah,  
no . . . no. . . .

The Princess Goneril is right; she judges  
me:

A sinful woman cannot steadily gaze reply  
To the cool baffling looks of virgin untried  
force.

She stands beside that crumbling mother  
in her hate,

And, although we know so well—she and I,  
O we know—

That she could love no mother nor partake  
in anguish,

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

Yet she is flouted when the king forsakes  
her dam,  
She must protect her very flesh, her  
tenderer flesh,  
Although she cannot wince; she 's wild in  
her cold brain,  
And soon I must be made to pay a cruel  
price  
For this one gloomy joy in my uncherished  
life.  
Envy and greed are watching me aloof  
(Yes, now none of the women will walk  
with me),  
Longing to see me ruined, but she 'll do  
it. . . .  
It is a lonely thing to love a king. . . .

*[She puts her cheek gradually closer  
and closer to LEAR'S cheek as she  
speaks: at length he kisses her  
suddenly and vehemently, as if he  
would grasp her lips with his: she  
receives it passively, her head  
thrown back, her eyes closed.]*



*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

LEAR

Goldilocks, when the crown is couching in  
your hair

And those two mingled golds brighten each  
other's wonder,

You shall produce a son from flesh  
unused—

Virgin I chose you for that, first crops are  
strongest—

A tawny fox with your high-stepping  
action,

With your untiring power and glittering  
eyes,

To hold my lands together when I am done,  
To keep my lands from crumbling into  
mouthfuls

For the short jaws of my three mewling  
vixens.

Hatch for me such a youngster from my  
seed,

KING LEAR'S WIFE

And I and he shall rein my hot-breathed  
wenches  
To let you grind the edges off their teeth.

GORMFLAITH

[*Shaking her head sadly.*]

Life holds no more than this for me; this is  
my hour.

When she is dead I know you 'll buy  
another queen—

Giving a county for her, gaining a duchy  
with her—

And put me to wet nursing, leashing me  
with the thralls.

It will not be unbearable—I 've had your  
love.

Master and friend, grant then this hour to  
me:

Never again, maybe, can we two sit  
At love together, unwatched, unknown of  
all,

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

In the queen's chamber, near the queen's  
crown

And with no conscious queen to hold it  
from us :

Now let me wear the queen's true crown  
on me

And snatch a breathless knowledge of the  
feeling

Of what it would have been to sit by you  
Always and closely, equal and exalted,  
To be my light when life is dark again.

### LEAR

Girl, by the black stone god, I did not think  
You had the nature of a chambermaid,  
Who pries and fumbles in her lady's  
clothes

With her red hands, or on her soily neck  
Stealthily hangs her lady's jewels or  
pearls.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

You shall be tiring-maid to the next queen  
And try her crown on every day o' your  
life

In secrecy, if that is your desire:  
If you would be a queen, cleanse yourself  
quickly  
Of menial fingering and servile thought.

GORMFLAITH

You need not crown me. Let me put it on  
As briefly as a gleam of winter sun.  
I will not even warm it with my hair.

LEAR

You cannot have the nature of a queen  
If you believe that there are things above  
you:  
Crowns make no queens, queens are the  
cause of crowns.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

GORMFLAITH

*[Slipping from his knee.]*

Then I will take one. Look.

*[She tiptoes lightly round the front  
of the bed to where the crown  
hangs on the wall.]*

LEAR

Come here, mad thing—come back!  
Your shadow will wake the queen.

GORMFLAITH

Hush, hush! That angry voice  
Will surely wake the queen.

*[She lifts the crown from the peg,  
and returns with it.]*

LEAR

Go back; bear back the crown:  
Hang up the crown again.  
We are not helpless serfs  
To think things are forbidden  
And steal them for our joy.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

GORMFLAITH

Hush, hush! It is too late;  
I dare not go again.

LEAR

Put down the crown: your hands are base  
hands yet.  
Give it to me: it issues from my hands.

GORMFLAITH

*[Seating herself on his knee again,  
and crowning herself.]*

Let anger keep your eyes steady and bright  
To be my guiding mirror: do not move.  
You have received two queens within your  
eyes.

*[She laughs clearly, like a bird's  
sudden song.]*

*[HYGD awakes and, after an instant's  
bewilderment, turns her head to-  
ward the sound; finding the bed-*

KING LEAR'S WIFE

*curtain dropt, she moves it aside a little with her fingers; she watches LEAR and GORMFLAITH for a short time, then the curtain slips from her weak grasp and she lies motionless.]*

LEAR

*[Continuing meanwhile.]*

Doff it. . . . *[GORMFLAITH kisses him.]*

Enough. . . . *[Kiss.]* Unless you do

. . . *[Kiss.]* my will . . . *[Kiss.]*

I shall . . . *[Kiss.]* I shall . . . *[Kiss.]*

I 'll have you . . . *[Kiss.]* sent . . .

*[Kiss.]* to . . . *[Kiss.]*

GORMFLAITH

Hush.

LEAR

Come to the garden: you shall hear me  
there.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

GORMFLAITH

I dare not leave the queen. . . . Yes, yes, I  
come.

LEAR

No, you are better here: the guard would  
see you.

GORMFLAITH

Not when we reach the pathway near the  
appleyard.

[*They rise.*]

LEAR

Girl, you are changed: you yield more  
beauty so.

[*They go out hand in hand by the doorway at the back. As they pass the crumpled letter GORMFLAITH drops her handkerchief on it, then picks up handkerchief and letter together and thrusts them into her bosom as she passes out.*]



## KING LEAR'S WIFE

HYGD

[*Fingering back the bed-curtain again.*]

How have they vanished? What are they  
doing now?

GORMFLAITH

[*Singing outside.*]

If you have a mind to kiss me,  
You shall kiss me in the dark:  
Yet rehearse, or you might miss me—  
Make my mouth your noontide mark.  
See, I prim and pout it so;  
Now take aim and . . . No, no, no!  
Shut your eyes, or you 'll not learn  
Where the darkness soon shall hide me:  
If you will not, then, in turn,  
I 'll shut mine. Come, have you spied me?

[*GORMFLAITH'S voice grows fainter  
as the song closes.*]

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

HYGD

Does he remember love-ways used with  
me?

Shall I never know? Is it too near?  
I 'll watch him at his wooing once again,  
Though I peer up at him across my  
grave-sill.

*[She gets out of bed and takes several steps toward the garden doorway; she totters and sways, then, turning, stumbles back to the bed for support.]*

Limbs, will you die? It is not yet the time.  
I know more discipline: I 'll make you go.

*[She fumbles along the bed to the head, then, clinging against the wall, drags herself toward the back of the room.]*

It is too far. I cannot see the wall.  
I will go ten more steps: only ten more.  
One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

Sundown is soon to-day: it is cold and  
dark.

Now ten steps more, and much will have  
been done.

One. Two. Three. Four. Ten.

Eleven. Twelve. Sixteen. Nineteen.  
Twenty.

Twenty-one. Twenty-three. Twenty-  
eight. Thirty. Thirty-one.

At last the turn. Thirty-six. Thirty-nine.  
Forty.

Now only once again. Two. Three.

What do the voices say? I hear too many.  
The door: but here there is no garden. . . .  
Ah!

*[She holds herself up an instant by  
the door-curtains; then she reels  
and falls, her body in the room,  
her head and shoulders beyond  
the curtains.]*

KING LEAR'S WIFE

[GONERIL enters by the door beyond the bed, carrying the filled cup carefully in both hands.]

GONERIL

Where are you? What have you done?

Speak to me.

[Turning and seeing HYGD, she lets the cup fall and leaps to the open door by the bed.]

Merryn, hither, hither! . . . Mother, O mother!

[She goes to HYGD. MERRYN enters.]

MERRYN

Princess, what has she done? Who has left her?

She must have been alone.

GONERIL

Where is Gormflaith?

KING LEAR'S WIFE

MERRYIN

Mercy o' mercies, everybody asks me  
For Gormflaith, then for Gormflaith, then  
for Gormflaith,  
And I ask everybody else for her;  
But she is nowhere, and the king will foam.  
Send me no more; I am old with running  
about  
After a bodiless name.

GONERIL

She has been here,  
And she has left the queen. This is her  
deed.

MERRYIN

Ah! cruel, cruel! The shame, the pity . . .

GONERIL

Lift.

*[Together they raise HYGD, and  
carry her to bed.]*

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

GONERIL

She breathes, but something flitters under  
her flesh:

Wynoc the leech must help us now. Go,  
run,

Seek him, and come back quickly, and do  
not dare

To come without him.

MERRYIN

It is useless, lady:

There 's fever at the cowherd's in the  
marsh,

And Wynoc broods above it twice a day,  
And I have lately seen him hobble thither.

GONERIL

I never heard such scornful wickedness  
As that a king's physician so should choose  
To watch and even heal base men and  
poor—

KING LEAR'S WIFE

And, more than all, when there 's a queen  
a-dying. . . .

H<sub>YGD</sub>

[*Recovering consciousness.*]

Whence come you, dearest daughter?

What have I done?

Are you a dream? I thought I was alone.

Have you been hunting on the windy  
height?

Your hands are not thus gentle after  
hunting.

Or have I heard you singing through my  
sleep?

Stay with me now: I have had piercing  
thoughts

Of what the ways of life will do to you  
To mould and maim you, and I have a  
power

To bring these to expression that I knew  
not.

KING LEAR'S WIFE

Why do you wear my crown? Why do you  
wear

My crown, I say? Why do you wear my  
crown?

I am falling, falling! Lift me: hold me up.

[GONERIL *climbs on the bed and supports* HYGD *against her shoulder.*]

It is the bed that breaks, for still I sink.  
Grip harder: I am slipping!

GONERIL

Woman, help!

[MERRYNN *hurries round to the front of the bed and supports* HYGD *on her other side.*]

[HYGD *points at the far corner of the room.*]

Why is the king's mother standing there?  
She should not wear her crown before me  
now.

Send her away, she had a savage mind.



*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Will you not hang a shawl across the  
corner

So that she cannot stare at me again?

*[With a rending sob she buries her  
face in GONERIL's bosom.]*

Ah! she is coming! Do not let her touch  
me!

Brave splendid daughter, how easily you  
save me!

But soon will Gormflaith come, she stays  
for ever.

O, will she bring my crown to me once  
more?

Yes, Gormflaith, yes. . . . Daughter, pay  
Gormflaith well.

GONERIL

Gormflaith has left you lonely:

'T is Gormflaith who shall pay.

KING LEAR'S WIFE

HYGD

No, Gormflaith; Gormflaith . . . Not my  
loneliness . . .

Everything . . . Pay Gormflaith . . .

[*Her head falls back over GONERIL's  
shoulder and she dies.*]

GONERIL

[*Laying HYGD down in bed again.*]

Send horsemen to the marshes for the  
leech,

And let them bind him on a horse's back  
And bring him swiftlier than an old man  
rides.

MERRYIN

This is no leech's work: she 's a dead  
woman.

I 'd best be finding if the wisdom-women

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Have come from Brita's child-bed to their  
drinking  
By the cook's fire, for soon she 'll be past  
handling.

GONERIL

This is not death: death could not be like  
this.  
She is quite warm—though nothing moves  
in her.  
I did not know death could come all at  
once:  
If life is so ill-seated no one is safe.  
Cannot we leave her like herself awhile?  
Wait awhile, Merryn . . . No, no, no; not  
yet!

MERRYIN

Child, she is gone and will not come again,  
However we cover our faces and pretend  
She will be there if we uncover them.

KING LEAR'S WIFE

I must be hasty, or she 'll be as stiff  
As a straw mattress is.

*[She hurries out by the door near  
the bed.]*

GONERIL

*[Throwing the whole length of her  
body along HYGD's body, and em-  
bracing it.]*

Come back, come back; the things I have  
not done

Beat in upon my brain from every side:  
I know not where to put myself to bear  
them:

If I could have you now I could act well.  
My inward life, deeds that you have not  
known,

I burn to tell you in a sudden dread  
That now your ghost discovers them in me.  
Hearken, mother; between us there 's a  
bond

KING LEAR'S WIFE

Of flesh and essence closer than love can  
cause:

It cannot be unknit so soon as this,  
And you must know my touch,  
And you shall yield a sign.  
Feel, feel this urging throb: I call to  
you. . . .

[GORMFLAITH, *still crowned, enters  
by the garden doorway.*]

GORMFLAITH

Come back! Help me and shield me!

[*She disappears through the curtains.*]

[*GONERIL has sprung to her feet at the first sound of GORMFLAITH's voice.*]

[*LEAR enters through the garden doorway, leading GORMFLAITH by the hand.*]

LEAR

What is to do?

KING LEAR'S WIFE

GONERIL

*[Advancing to meet them with a  
deep obeisance.]*

O sir, the queen is dead : long live the  
queen !

You have been ready with the coronation.

LEAR

What do you mean ? Young madam, will  
you mock ?

GONERIL

But is not she your choice ?

The old queen thought so, for I found her  
here,

Lipping the prints of her supplanter's feet,  
Prostrate in homage, on her face, silent.

I tremble within to have seen her fallen  
down.

I must be pardoned if I scorn your ways :  
You cannot know this feeling that I know,

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

You are not of her kin or house; but I  
Share blood with her, and, though she grew  
too worn  
To be your queen, she was my mother, sir.

GORMFLAITH

The queen has seen me.

LEAR

She is safe in bed.

GONERIL

Do not speak low: your voice sounds guilty  
so;  
And there is no more need—she will not  
wake.

LEAR

She cannot sleep for ever. When she  
wakes  
I will announce my purpose in the need

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Of Britain for a prince to follow me,  
And tell her that she is to be deposed. . . .  
What have you done? She is not breathing  
now.

She breathed here lately. Is she truly  
dead?

GONERIL

Your graceful consort steals from us too  
soon:

Will you not tell her that she should  
remain—

If she can trust the faith you keep with a  
queen?

*[She steps to GORMFLAITH, who is  
sidling toward the garden door-  
way, and, taking her hand, leads  
her to the foot of the bed.]*

Lady, why will you go? The king intends  
That you shall soon be royal, and thereby  
Admitted to our breed: then stay with us



## KING LEAR'S WIFE

In this domestic privacy to mourn  
The grief here fallen on our family.  
Kneel now; I yield the eldest daughter's  
place.

Why do you fumble in your bosom so?  
Put your cold hands together; close your  
eyes,  
In inward isolation to assemble  
Your memories of the dead, your prayers  
for her.

*[She turns to LEAR, who has approached the bed and drawn back the curtain.]*

What utterance of doom would the king use  
Upon a watchman in the castle garth  
Who left his gate and let an enemy in?  
The watcher by the queen thus left her  
station:  
The sick bruised queen is dead of that  
neglect.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

And what should be the doom on a seducer  
Who drew that sentinel from his fixt  
watch?

LEAR

She had long been dying, and she would  
have died  
Had all her dutiful daughters tended her  
bed.

GONERIL

Yes, she had long been dying in her heart.  
She lived to see you give her crown away;  
She died to see you fondle a menial:  
These blows you dealt now, but what elder  
wounds  
Received them to such purpose suddenly?  
What had you caused her to remember  
most?  
What things would she be like to babble  
over

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

In the wild helpless hour when fitful life  
No more can choose what thoughts it shall  
encourage

In the tost mind? She has suffered you  
twice over,

Your animal thoughts and hungry powers,  
this day,

Until I knew you unkingly and untrue.

LEAR

Punishment once taught you daughterly  
silence;

It shall be tried again. . . . What has she  
said?

GONERIL

You cannot touch me now I know your  
nature:

Your force upon my mind was only terrible  
When I believed you a cruel flawless man.  
Ruler of lands and dreaded judge of men,

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Now you have done a murder with your  
mind,  
Can you see any murderer put to death?  
Can you . . .

LEAR

What has she said?

GONERIL

Continue in your joy of punishing evil,  
Your passion of just revenge upon  
wrong-doers,  
Unkingly and untrue?

LEAR

Enough: what do you know?

GONERIL

That which could add a further agony  
To the last agony, the daily poison  
Of her late, withering life; but never word

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Of fairer hours or any lost delight.  
Have you no memory, either, of her youth,  
While she was still to use, spoil, forsake,  
That maims your new contentment with a  
    longing  
For what is gone and will not come again?

LEAR

I did not know that she could die to-day.  
She had a bloodless beauty that cheated  
    me:

She was not born for wedlock. She shut  
    me out.

She is no colder now. . . . I 'll hear no  
    more.

You shall be answered afterward for this.  
Put something over her: get her buried:  
I will not look on her again.

*[He breaks from GONERIL and flings  
    abruptly out by the door near the  
    bed.]*

KING LEAR'S WIFE

GORMFLAITH

My king, you leave me!

GONERIL

Soon we follow him:

But, ah, poor fragile beauty, you cannot  
rise

While this grave burden weights your  
drooping head.

*[Laying her hand caressingly on  
GORMFLAITH'S neck, she gradually  
forces her head farther and far-  
ther down.]*

You were not nurtured to sustain a crown,  
Your unanointed parents could not breed  
The spirit that ten hundred years must  
ripen.

Lo, how you sink and fail.

GORMFLAITH

You had best take care,

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

For where my neck has bruises yours shall  
have wounds.

The king knows of your wolfish snapping  
at me:

He will protect me.

GONERIL

Ay, if he is in time.

GORMFLAITH

*[Taking off the crown and holding  
it up blindly toward GONERIL with  
one hand.]*

Take it and let me go!

GONERIL

Nay, not to me:

You are the queen's to serve her even in  
death.

Yield her her own. Approach her: do not  
fear;

KING LEAR'S WIFE

She will not chide you or forgive you now.  
Go on your knees; the crown still holds  
you down.

[GORMFLAITH *stumbles forward on  
her knees and lays the crown on  
the bed, then crouches motion-  
lessly against the bedside.*]

GONERIL

[*Taking the crown and putting it on  
the dead queen's head.*]

Mother and queen, to you this holiest  
circlet  
Returns, by you renews its purpose and  
pride;  
Though it is sullied with a menial warmth,  
Your august coldness shall rehalow it,  
And when the young lewd blood that lent it  
heat  
Is also cooler we can well forget.

[*She steps to GORMFLAITH.*]



*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Rise! Come, for here there is no more  
to do,

And let us seek your chamber, if you will,  
There to confer in greater privacy;

For we have now interment to prepare.

*[She leads GORMFLAITH to the door  
near the bed.]*

You must walk first, you are still the queen  
elect.

*[When GORMFLAITH has passed be-  
fore her GONERIL unsheathes her  
hunting knife.]*

GORMFLAITH

*[Turning in the doorway.]*

What will you do?

GONERIL

*[Thrusting her forward with the  
haft of her knife.]*

On! On! On! Go in!

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

[*She follows GORMFLAITH out.*]

[*After a moment's interval two elderly women, one a little younger than the other, enter by the same door: they wear black hoods and shapeless black gowns with large sleeves that flap like the wings of ungainly birds: between them they carry a heavy cauldron of hot water.*]

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

We were listening. We were listening.

THE ELDER WOMAN

We were both listening.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

Did she struggle?

THE ELDER WOMAN

She could not struggle long.

[*They set down the cauldron at the foot of the bed.*]

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

THE ELDER WOMAN

*[Curtseying to the queen's body.]*

Saving your presence, madam, we are come  
To make you sweeter than you 'll be  
    hereafter,  
And then be done with you.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

*[Curtseying in turn.]*

Three days together, my lady, y' have had  
    me ducked  
For easing a foolish maid at the wrong  
    time;  
But now your breath is stopped and you  
    are colder,  
And you shall be as wet as a drowned rat  
Ere I have done with you.

THE ELDER WOMAN

*[Fumbling in the folds of the robe  
    that hangs on the wall.]*

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Her pocket is empty ; Merryn has been here  
first.

Hearken, and then begin :

You have not touched a royal corpse  
before,

But I have stretched a king and an old  
queen,

A king's aunt and a king's brother too,  
Without much boasting of a still-born  
princess ;

So that I know, as a priest knows his  
prayers,

All that is written in the chamberlain's  
book

About the handling of exalted corpses,  
Stripping them and trussing them for the  
grave :

And there it says that the chief corpse-  
washer

Shall take for her own use by sacred right

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

The coverlid, the upper sheet, the mattress  
Of any bed in which a queen has died,  
And the last robe of state the body wore;  
While humbler helpers may divide among  
    them

The under sheet, the pillow, and the bed-  
    gown

Stript from the cooling queen.

Be thankful, then, and praise me every day  
That I have brought no other women with  
    me

To spoil you of your share.

## THE YOUNGER WOMAN

Ah, you have always been a friend to me:  
Many 's the time I have said I did not know  
How I could even have lived but for your  
    kindness.

[*The ELDER WOMAN draws down the  
bed-clothes from the queen's body,  
loosens them from the bed, and  
throws them on the floor.*]

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

### THE ELDER WOMAN

Pull her feet straight: is your mind  
wandering?

*[She commences to fold the bed-clothes, singing as she moves about.]*

A louse crept out of my lady's shift—  
Ahumm, Ahumm, Ahee—  
Crying "Oi! Oi! We are turned adrift;  
The lady's bosom is cold and stiffed,  
And her arm-pit 's cold for me."

*[While the ELDER WOMAN sings, the YOUNGER WOMAN straightens the queen's feet and ties them together, draws the pillow from under her head, gathers her hair in one hand and knots it roughly; then she loosens her nightgown, revealing a jewel hung on a cord round the queen's neck.]*

KING LEAR'S WIFE

THE ELDER WOMAN

[*Running to the vacant side of the bed.*]

What have you there? Give it to me.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

It is mine:

I found it.

THE ELDER WOMAN

Leave it.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

Let go.

THE ELDER WOMAN

Leave it, I say.

Will you not? Will you not? An eye for  
a jewel, then!

[*She attacks the face of the YOUNGER  
WOMAN with her disengaged  
hand.*]

KING LEAR'S WIFE

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

[*Starting back.*]

Oh!

[*The ELDER WOMAN breaks the cord  
and thrusts the jewel into her  
pocket.*]

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

Aie! Aie! Aie! Old thief! You are  
always thieving!

You stole a necklace on your wedding day:  
You could not bear a child—you stole your  
daughter:

You stole a shroud the morn your husband  
died:

Last week you stole the Princess Regan's  
comb. . . .

[*She stumbles into the chair by the  
bed, and, throwing her loose  
sleeves over her head, rocks her-  
self and moans.*]



## KING LEAR'S WIFE

### THE ELDER WOMAN

*[Resuming her clothes-folding and her song]*

The lady's linen 's no longer neat—  
Ahumm, Ahumm, Ahee;  
Her savour is neither warm nor sweet;  
It 's close for two in a winding sheet,  
And lice are too good for worms to eat;  
So here 's no place for me.

*[GONERIL enters by the door near the bed: her knife and the hand that holds it are bloody. She pauses a moment irresolutely.]*

### THE ELDER WOMAN

Still work for old Hrogneda, little  
princess?

*[GONERIL goes straight to the cauldron, passing the women as if they were not there: she kneels and washes her knife and her hand in it. The women retire to the back of the chamber.]*

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

GONERIL

*[Speaking to herself.]*

The way is easy : and it is to be used.  
How could this need have been conceived  
    slowly?  
In a keen mind it should have leapt and  
    burnt :  
What I have done would have been better  
    done  
When my sad mother lived and could feel  
    joy.  
This striking without thought is better  
    than hunting ;  
She shewed more terror than an animal,  
She was more shiftless. . . .  
A little blood is lightly washed away,  
A common stain that need not be  
    remembered ;  
And a hot spasm of rightness quickly born

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Can guide me to kill justly and shall guide.

[*LEAR enters by the door near the bed.*]

LEAR

Goneril . . . Gormflaith, Gormflaith . . .

Have you seen Gormflaith?

GONERIL

I led her to her chamber lately, sir.

LEAR

Ay, she is in her chamber. She is there.

GONERIL

Have you been there already? Could you  
not wait?

LEAR

Daughter, she is bleeding: she is slain.

KING LEAR'S WIFE

GONERIL

*[Rising from the cauldron with  
dripping hands.]*

Yes, she is slain: I did it with a knife:  
And in this water is dissolved her blood,

*[Raising her arms and sprinkling  
the queen's body.]*

That now I scatter on the queen of death  
For signal to her spirit that I can slake  
Her long corrosion of misery with such  
balm—

Blood for weeping, terror for woe, death  
for death,

A broken body for a broken heart.

What will you say against me and my  
deed?

LEAR

That now you cannot save yourself from  
me.

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

While your blind virgin power still stood  
    apart  
In an unused, unviolated life,  
You judged me in my weakness, and  
    because  
I felt you unflawed I could not answer you;  
But you have mingled in mortality  
And violently begun the common life  
By fault against your fellows; and the  
    state,  
The state of Britain that inheres in me  
Not touched by my humanity or sin,  
Passions or privy acts, shall be as hard  
And savage to you as to a murderess.

GONERIL

*[Taking a letter from her girdle.]*

I found a warrant in her favoured bosom,  
    king:  
She wore this on her heart when you were  
    crowning her.

KING LEAR'S WIFE

LEAR

But this is not my hand:

*[Looking about him on the floor.]*

Where is the other letter?

GONERIL

Is there another letter? What should it  
say?

LEAR

There is no other letter if you have none.

*[Reading.]*

“Open your window when the moon is  
dead,

And I will come again.

The men say everywhere that you are  
faithless . . .

And your eyes shifty eyes. Ah, but I love  
you, Gormflaith. . . .”

This is not hers: she 'd not receive such  
words.

## *KING LEAR'S WIFE*

GONERIL

Her name stands twice therein : her  
perfume fills it :  
My knife went through it ere I found it on  
her.

LEAR

The filth is suitably dead. You are my true  
daughter.

GONERIL

I do not understand how men can govern,  
Use craft and exercise the duty of cunning,  
Anticipate treason, treachery meet with  
treachery,  
And yet believe a woman because she looks  
Straight in their eyes with mournful,  
trustful gaze,  
And lips like innocence, all gentleness.  
Your Gormflaith could not answer a  
woman's eyes.

## KING LEAR'S WIFE

I did not need to read her in a letter ;  
I am not woman yet, but I can feel  
What untruths are instinctive in my kind,  
And how some men desire deceit from us.  
Come ; let these washers do what they must  
do :  
Or shall your queen be wrapped and  
coffined awry ?

*[She goes out by the garden doorway.]*

## LEAR

I thought she had been broken long ago :  
She must be wedded and broken, I cannot  
do it.

*[He follows GONERIL out.]*

*[The two women return to the bed-  
side.]*

## THE ELDER WOMAN

Poor, masterful king, he is no easier,  
Although his tearful wife is gone at last :



*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

A wilful girl shall prick and thwart him  
now.

Old gossip, we must hasten; the queen is  
setting.

Lend me a pair of pennies to weight her  
eyes.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

Find your own pennies: then you can steal  
them safely.

THE ELDER WOMAN

Praise you the gods of Britain, as I do  
praise them,

That I have been sweet-natured from my  
birth,

And that I lack your unforgiving mind.

Friend of the worms, help me to lift her  
clear

And draw away the under sheet for you;

*KING LEAR'S WIFE*

Then go and spread the shroud by the hall  
fire—

I never could put damp linen on a corpse.

*[She sings.]*

The louse made off unhappy and wet;—

Ahummm, Ahummm, Ahee—

He 's looking for us, the little pet;

So haste, for her chin 's to tie up yet,

And let us begone with what we can get—

Her ring for thee, her gown for Bet,

Her pocket turned out for me.







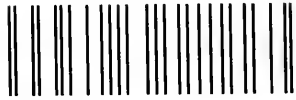
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